

Bookcrossing

It's a cold day in September. She is walking a buggy through the park at 8am. No shops are open yet, but if she stays indoors with him for another hour she'll go insane. In the buggy Edward is chewing on a hard biscuit attached to a clip with a string. It's supposed to help with teething. She breathes deeply.

The air is damp and you can smell plants. No idea what their names are. Dave sets off for work at 7. He has a long drive to work, in Halifax. We could move closer, but we've always liked it here. The schools are better here. It hasn't rained but the pavements are a dark shade of wet tarmac. The rhythm of the buggy is soothing to mother and child. Is it the same McLaren who make Formula One cars?

Ahead of her an old couple are walking along. They wear the brown and beige waterproof coats of the old. Where do they get them from? Never seen them in a shop. Probably years old from C&A, BHS, other long-defunct department stores. His walking is irregular. One leg seems stiff and he's dragging that foot through the arc of his stride, effortfully. The woman links arms with him. Her hair is thin, curly and grey. They are here every day. They carry food for the wild birds and from time to time they stop and scatter some, like a story-book farmer broadcasting seed. Or that parable. Some falls on stony ground. Some dies. They do this every day. Faithful to the birds, linking arms as she supports him on this walk, which must be really good for his mobility. Wonder what's wrong with him. Is it a false leg? He can't be old enough to have been in the war, can he? Old men always make her sad. Sometimes seeing them alone, in their formal dress as they walk up to the chemist - wearing a suit and tie to do the shopping - makes her cry.

They stop at a railing next to the water and feed ducks bread. She overtakes them, peering into the large cuboid plasticised canvas bag the woman carries. In it are a couple of fat-balls. She's seen the woman tying them on to trees. Fat balls for the wild birds in the park. Raided by squirrels too.

She glances over at the swings as if looking into her future. There's one child there already with a parent who, like her, has abandoned the house early this morning. The woman stands near the climbing frame spotting the child as it scales some netting.

She's moving down the slope now. Letting the steepness take control of her, her feet slapping down harder now. The slope makes it easy to peer down at Edward who's soothed by the motion of the buggy and is peaceful. Someone is running along the road at the bottom of the valley. A woman alone, wearing headphones - an I-pod in one of those trendy arm things. There's a bench down there where she usually sits down. Should bring a flask. Should bring my MP3 player. Why don't I remember? Dave's put some new music on it. He takes a can of lager out with him, putting it in the baby-bottle holder as he goes up-hill, steering with one hand and drinking as he goes along the flat. Probably get arrested: drunk in charge. Half the town is a no-drinking zone anyway. But you can't tell him anything, of course. Another runner passes the woman from the other direction. They nod at each other, the courtesy of people with a shared passion. A random connection. The man stops near to her bench and puts something down. Doesn't look like litter. How strange! Wonder what it is?

Sophia rounds onto the flat just as the runner crosses the path she's come down. She looks down at the palms of her hands. Someone told her once that that blotchiness means that you are exercising well, extremities well oxygenated or something. All this walking: it's good. Must weigh myself. Should give Trace a ring. Wonder if she still goes to the gym. They have a crèche, don't they? Or a swim would be nice. Just once a week, perhaps. It's nice, doing this route. You notice things: the changes in the weather, the way the air tastes in different months. How the trees grow.

On the bench is a ziplock bag. There's a book inside. This is strange.

Inside the bag, outside the book is a brightly coloured slip of paper. On it is printed the legend "Book-crossers Scatter Sunshine". The letters have been shaded across in a sort of rainbow of pencil-crayon. It looks childlike. Sophia parks the buggy, puts the brake on and sits down. Eddie is asleep. She opens the bag. Sophia's hair is a rich dark brown, curving into her jaw, shelving up towards that pointy bit at the back of her head. Dave likes this style of bob: it accentuates her nape. Sophia allows herself to enjoy the sound of the word "nape" with her mind's ear.

No-one is watching her. The bookcrosser ran past after leaving the bag here. Sophia opens the bag and takes the book out. It's a funny-looking book. Not like a real book. It seems a bit home-made. The cover is un-illustrated and there's no blurb. The title of the book is "Read Me" - like a magic object in Alice in Wonderland. Sophia wonders what transformation will occur if she obeys the book's imperative.

Are you reading me? Before radio, before telephones, there was this low-tech telepathy. I write and you read my mind. In return I have a glimpse of the thoughts in your mind - mostly

guess-work but there's some hope I'll be right about how you'll react to my words. I might have written in another language. I might be dead, but in this encounter we are intimates.

Sophia reads. In the morning sunshine, her hair is shiny. She crosses her feet at the ankles and reaches out with one hand to rock the buggy gently, but Eddie is out like a light. The light is dappled by its path through the leaves of the tree near which the bench is sited. Sophia's mouth is slightly open and the tip of her tongue rests lightly behind her top front teeth. Now she draws her hand back from the buggy and her shoulders relax as she takes a deeper breath and settles herself on the bench. Now the book is resting on her lap, cradled comfortably in both hands and she gives herself up to it.

In the story, a boy and a girl are flirting.

I don't know why we are doing this. No actual kissing. She moves her lips over mine, touching but not softening or opening into a kiss. This is torture. But we're not ready yet. I smell her skin. Warm clothes on a cold day. Autumn; she smells like September afternoons. Gold, cold, clean days, walking out into fallen leaves.

Sophia notices the wide spread of the book, her thumbs on the margins. Sophia allows herself to feel the excitement of a first kiss. On page 7, the two characters are kissing goodnight.

She's wearing a red dress. They're on the drive of a house. It's not her parents' place - she's a lodger here. It's a hot summer evening. The fact that they have been for a meal in a restaurant, that they are saying goodnight on a doorstep, all this makes this moment suddenly significant.

Sophia imagines the scene, which could so easily have been from her own life, years ago. The thrill of a kiss when a kiss is as far as things are going, for now.

She likes to kiss in pubs. It's quite early and we meet in a pub in town. I buy pints of dark beer. She leans across and kisses me hard on the mouth. I close my eyes, because I am self-conscious. Now the bitter is starting to work and I don't care. It's wonderful. I really don't care who sees. I can smell her foundation, tiny particles dislodged by the friction of this kiss. I sniff it in. This is her smell: a mixture of her body's signature and the make-up she uses. It's unique. I'd know her in seconds anywhere. When I think of her it's in the act of kissing blindly in public.

Sophia moves her left thumb into the centre of the book, pinching the spine so the book stayed open. She touches her mouth. She's thinking about kissing for the first time in years. In the story the boy is staying the night at his girlfriend's house for the first time.

Her mother doesn't allow boys in her room, so you sleep on the sofa. It's hard to get to sleep. It's a strange room. The smells of her mother's cooking, her scent and the cleaning products she uses. Like a patina left on the surface of everything - the deposit left by their lives on the fabric of the rooms. But in the night she comes to you. It's dark, so dark in the living room. You can't say anything, for fear of waking her mother. For a moment you're disorientated. What's this? Who is this? The curtains are heavy, dark, totally opaque. Your eyes don't adjust. You feel her hair on your face. For seconds you are unsure - is this some bedroom farce where the girl visits the wrong room? No - and you feel the shock of it again - she is going out with me. She bends low to kiss you. The smell of her skin is unmistakable. It has an automatic effect on you. You wonder for a moment if you are subjects in some strange experiment. But then there's nothing to think about except her lips on yours. You feel the roundness of her nostrils against your face. In your mind's eyes you are re-constructing this invisible scene. The kiss in the dark. The fatness of her lips, the texture of them registering against yours is synaesthesia. This visit from a succubus.

The next kiss is in a different house. Sophia wedges the book's spine more firmly into her lap.

They are lying on the carpet. Light streams in aslant through the patio windows. He feels the weight of her, the heat. The beams of the sun make her hair iridescent. The light and warmth excite molecules of perfume, her own smells, the oils in her skin become airborne. He can see capillary veins in her ears. Her clothes are black. Her hair black. He looks up and sees her dark eyes, unreadable against the washed out background of blinding window-light. He breathes her in, feels her pressing him down into the floor. Every part of her penetrating him utterly. She takes part of his lip between her teeth.

Sophia checks her watch, continues. A few pages later, they're in bed.

It works by touch alone. She's wearing something rough to the touch, like winceyette. Too scared to open his eyes. There was a wordless invitation. He had been sleeping on the floor beside her; now he's fully awake in her arms, exploring the way her nightgown opens at the front. The feel of her torso. There's an impossible trade-off. To be totally present is to risk losing some detail to the oblivion of amnesia. To hover above, observing and recording is to be a tourist in his own life. A man who sees everything through the lens of a camera. Never to experience the fine hairs above her top lip, now slicked with sweat, now kissed smoother still, because too busy recording the experience. His mind slipped away as he gave into the moment and the unreflectiveness of his flesh.

Sophia reads on, about what happens the next day. She looks down self-consciously at the dark hairs long her forearm.

Under the table. What are we doing here? I can smell the grill, days-worth of toast. That window looks down into a yard, across to a magic shop. We're between the pale wooden legs of the square kitchen table, topped with an orange oilcloth. Sudden urge to kiss took them to the floor. What are we doing here? Like lovers sheltering from an earthquake. Should be in a door jamb. Sheltering from a falling bomb. Like lovers. Sorry. Fudge-mouth. Kissing that sludgy sweetness. Licking the grainy crystals off her teeth. Soft chewed bits down round her gums rooted out with my tongue. Take it down into my mouth. Sticky sweet lips her hair gets in her mouth gummed up with sugary saliva and fudge juice.

Time has passed, Eddie is blowing a small bubble in his spit. He stirs slightly, still asleep. Sophia looks around, feeling somehow guilty. Reading is a guilty pleasure in which she retreats from the world into silent communion. Dave makes her feel guilty about reading - always wanting to watch comedy DVDs that are never funny after the first time. Inside the book there's a sticker explaining how bookcrossing works. "Take me," adds a handwritten note. Sophia slips the colourful slip of paper she first noticed inside the book to mark her place and slides the book back into its ziplock bag. She pops the whole package between some folds in her buggy's hood and moves off.

Sophia turns the buggy back up the slope towards home. She feels her leg muscles working against the gradient, slight dampness in the small of her back. She notices the light scintillating a loose strand of hair. She sweeps it back over her ear and leans into the steepness. Dave doesn't like to kiss.

Sophia feeds Eddie and puts him on the floor with some toys. She puts the TV on, the familiar chatter of Cbeebies presenters saying that Balamory is coming on next. At the computer she finds the website mentioned inside her book and registers that she has found it. There's an option to leave some feedback. Without pausing to consider where this chain of actions might lead, Sophia composes a response. "I have just found this book. I had never heard of it. It's good; I like it." Only after submitting the form does Sophia remember the man - a man running who left the book carefully sealed in a zip-lock bag to protect it from the elements until its random recipient might find it. She smiles then, to think about a man leaving a book about kissing for a stranger to find. She's got ironing to do, she notices. Before starting she puts the book in her shopping bag, folds the buggy up neatly.